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ABSTRACT

Motivated in part by impending consolidation, a Chapter I reading teacher in an economically depressed rural community asked her middle-school students (n=30) to interview one person who had attended a community school in the past. Questions centered around school buildings, teachers, classes, and special activities. The students read the questions to the interviewees and wrote down their responses. Students put the responses in paragraph form and discussed the results in class. Comments about the school buildings suggested that school maintenance was poor and there was a lack of money. Positive responses about community schools involved school values and rituals, and specific memories of things such as cafeteria food, teachers, and activities. One respondent recalled integration during the 1960s as a "wonderful time". There were hints that the quality of education received at community schools was not always the best. Local middle school and high school students now attend large consolidated schools with more class offerings, newer facilities, and the latest in technology. Nevertheless, although these students are surrounded by people, they go through school alone with no sense of community to guide them. Despite poor school conditions and the lack of resources, students and teachers in the community schools of the past knew each other, learned together, and felt secure in their environment. (KS)

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# CHANGE FOR WORSE?

# ONE TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE OF RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

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Consolidation of American rural schools began at the turn of the century. At the time, the consolidation of rural schools was promoted as a way for communities to save money and provide a higher quality of education for children at a central location (Nelson, 1985).

Even during the early 1900s, school consolidation bitterly polarized rural communities and set neighbor against neighbor (Guilliford, 1991). Academician L.H. Bailey (1920) described the sense of community loss when a school left the area. When the school left the locality something vital went out of the neighborhood. Bailey mentioned that local pride was offended and initiative was removed. Many years later Alan Peshkin discovered the same theme of community loss when he researched the attempted consolidation of a rural elementary school in Illinois. He discovered that rural community school represented community autonomy, vitality and integration, as well as personal control, tradition, and identity (Peshkin, 1982). Quite simply, rural schools have been the glue that holds rural communities together (Lewis, 1992).

A study of Kentucky's Fifth Congressional District schools in 1986 went one step further. With the highest dropout rate, lowest holding power and lowest standardized test scores in Kentucky, it was concluded that the loss of community schools through consolidation was one of the contributing factors to the Fifth District's poor educational standing (Lamm, 1986).

On looking at the advantages of small schools, Barker and Gump's landmark study (1964) found that students in smaller high schools were much more involved in school activities and had more versatility of experiences than their counterparts in larger high schools. Students in larger schools were less active, less responsible, less effective, and less influential (Barker and Gump, 1964). Small schools also provided extra attention for its students, creating strong bonds among students, teachers, and administrators (Lewis, 1992).

Noted educator Daniel Davies (1991) summed it up when he said that one of America's biggest mistakes in the organization and conduct of public education was the construction of bigger and bigger school buildings and the consolidation of school districts. Davies declared that in the name of efficiency, everyone forgot the child.

With that backdrop, I would like to describe my own experience with rural school consolidation. I was a Chapter I reading teacher at a middle school in an economically depressed rural community for eight years. My school system was large and school officials had been consolidating schools since the early 1960s. When I found out my middle school was to be consolidated with another middle school outside the immediate community the following year, I asked my students to interview one person who had attended a community school in the past. With the closure of the middle school, only the community elementary school would

remain. How would community members react and what would they remember about their own school experiences?

I had several objectives in mind when I made the original assignment. Primarily I wanted my students to strengthen their writing skills. This would be accomplished by having them participate in an activity that had personal meaning for them -- interviewing friends and families about past school experiences and putting those responses in written form.

I also wanted to document a rural community's reaction to the closing of another one of its schools. What was it like to attend a community school? What were the teachers like? What about the buildings? What was a typical school day like? What were the good things and bad things about community schools? Were the community schools missed?

It is advantageous to know something about the community, otherwise known as the valley, and its schools. The first school in the valley was built over 70 years ago. The community itself is a paradox; it has contained factories and mills over the past 100 years which have employed a number of community members, but at the same time marred a very scenic area and endangered the health of its inhabitants. Community members, predominantly white, have lived in the valley for several generations, moving from mill houses, to trailers, to multifamily dwellings, and back again to begin the cycle over. There has never been an emphasis on education in the valley, instead a majority of

the student population has quit school as soon as possible, possibly married, started a family and gone to work at the mill or existed on welfare. The schools' drawing cards have their athletic programs. Sports are the backbone of the valley and the ticket to success.

The original school in the valley was built in the 1920s and served students from grade one through high school. By the 1950s there were two school buildings side by side, one housing grades one through eight and other serving as the high school. The physical proximity of the two buildings is significant. During this time, based on the responses of former students and teachers, there was a real closeness among teachers and students. "The teachers were closer back then." "We were all like family." In 1960 a consolidated high school was built a mile down the road from the existing schools and grades five through eight moved into the old high school. In the mid '70s an elementary school was built across the street from the old schools. It featured an open space design; a year after it opened walls were built to create individual classrooms. At that time the old elementary school was closed and eventually demolished and the original high school became a middle school for grades six through eight. The cycle was complete in 1991 when a new high school was build for students from one end of the county. The middle schools in the area were moved to the 1960 high school that had been vacated and the old middle school became an alternative high school for county students

who had had difficulties in their previous schools. The only community school in the valley is the elementary school.

I decided to let 30 of my middle school students interview at least one neighbor or family member that had attended a community school. The written questions centered around the school buildings, the teachers, the classes and special activities. The students read the questions to the interviewees, the interviewees answered the questions and the students wrote down their responses. Students put the responses in paragraph form and discussed the results in class. Small books were created from the interview responses.

My students and I found it difficult for a majority of community members interviewed to express themselves about their school experiences. Many of their responses were brief and noncommittal. "I miss my school friends." "My teachers were nice." This reluctance to talk, for whatever the reason, affected the outcomes.

The interview started with a question about the school buildings. Most of the respondents mentioned that the buildings were constructed of red brick. They said that the older buildings had been in poor condition. "The school was old and it looked like it was going to fall down any day." "It was rundown and dirty." The schools contained many flights of stairs and the dark hallways were painted an oppressive green. "The halls were always spooky. The

lights were always dim." These comments suggest that school maintenance was poor and there was a lack of money during this time period.

Many of the respondents mentioned that the locations of the gym, library, and cafeteria had changed over the years. These were key places in the school for socializing, so of course they had meaning for the students. One physical description of the school conjured up powerful images. "We had steam heat, a gym with a balcony and the boys' rest room was over the boiler room." Remember, rest rooms are another gathering place for students, where the real life of a school begins. Respondents concluded that they missed the physical presence of the now demolished community school buildings. "I miss seeing the old school when I drive by." Several older interviewees mentioned that they had a brick or a desk from the old school that they had saved as a remembrance. The school buildings had served as a community symbol.

All the respondents but one chose to remember positive things about community schools. Those "happy" responses could be divided into two categories: one group remembered school values/rituals and the others talked about specific memories. Older respondents recalled the values/rituals that had made community schools special. "We all pulled together to help each other. We were all poor after the depression and nobody was better off than the other person. We all went to school together grades 1 to 12. There were

36 people in my graduating class." One grandmother remembered carefree times. "We didn't have a worry back then." One woman talked about the opening school exercises. "We used to say our devotions, pledge the allegiance to the flag and sing songs. It seems like nowadays to do that it's against somebody." A respondent talked about how they respected teachers. There's a wistfulness to these comments, a desire to remember the positive things about the past. It is certainly reflection of what society was like at the time.

Younger former students had specific memories about community schools. Rich recollections, of all things, about cafeteria food surfaced. "Lunch was 25 cents and milk was a nickel. The food was good." No doubt there was lots of good country cooking taking place in the school cafeteria. Comments related to sports were common as well. "Playing softball with Mrs. Lee is what I remember." High school dropouts had regrets. "I wish I could go back and do the same things like I did in the middle school. My friends were always great to me, teachers always helped me out in my classes. My activities were always fun because I played sports." "I wished I had tried harder." Another dropout talked about being a leader. "I was king of the school bus in 8th grade." The socializing and the conflicts it created at school were mentioned. "Besides friends, the rest was pretty boring except the fights and the field trips." "My best memory was in the 8th grade at the end of the school

year when we had a party in the hall. Everybody was having fun and getting along with each other for the first time."

It should be noted that the schools in the valley were integrated in the '60s. Before this time blacks were bussed to a segregated school in another community. Race relations in the valley have always been good; blacks and whites have lived together in the valley for generations, working side by side with their neighbors. A black gentleman recalled his first days in his new school. "I was one of the first groups of blacks to attend the school as a result of consolidating black and white schools. It was a wonderful time."

There are hints that the quality of education received at community schools was not always the best. "We didn't have much work." "We had long recesses and we got to go across to the store and play all over the school grounds." "One year I never had any homework. The teacher let us do anything we wanted." The tracking system that was used at the middle school for a period of time proved to be detrimental for a majority of students and teachers. "It was just awful. We grouped the kids by ability and they stayed with that group the entire day. Group A was the smart group while Group D was the slow learners. You simply couldn't teach Group D." "We were assigned to a group and stayed with those kids all day. The best looking guys were in my group, including my husband now." "I was embarrassed to be in Group D. Everyone knew it was the dumb group and

we didn't learn anything."

What made traveling through those gloomy halls in buildings badly in need of repair, worthwhile? The teachers, of course. Beyond the teachers who were "nice" or "good" or "happy", former students talked about their favorite teachers in academic or personal terms. "She worked a lot harder with me so I could pass. She came to my house in the summer and helped me read and write." Respondents mentioned teachers that had made the subject matter come alive. "Miss Slader made the class so interesting and a unique way of teaching." "He made math fun even though I didn't like it." "She taught her favorite subject and encouraged us to use our minds." She read to us Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. It was very helpful." "She inspired me to develop a love for science."

Some interviewees saw their teachers as role models and deeply admired them. "She taught me how to listen to people." "She made me feel comfortable in the classroom." "She was like a mother." "She enjoyed teaching her students and it showed." A striking comment was made by a young man who had dropped out of school. "Mr. Trent and Mr. Jackson were the only ones that treated me like I was somebody."

Middle school and high school students in the valley now are at large consolidated schools with more class offerings, newer facilities and the latest in technology. They are surrounded by people, but go through school alone with no sense of community to guide them. Students don't know

everyone in the school and the majority aren't involved in school activities. The school dropout rate remains high, school vandalism is evident and teachers say the students don't seem to care.

Meanwhile, a community has lost its center, its school. The only things that are left are its post office, convenience store and video tape store. And those are the kinds of things that won't bring a community back.

Despite the poor condition of the community schools and their lack of resources, students and teachers in community schools knew each other, learned together, and felt secure in their environment. A smaller school provided advantages a larger school could never give.

There is hope for existing rural schools. Research is positive about the advantages of small rural schools for the future (Stephens, 1988). Because of school restructuring efforts small schools may be given the autonomy to create their own educational vision through site-based decision making without interference from the state (Stephens, 1988). Second, because of the increasing emphasis on early childhood education, small schools can expand their mission and strengthen community support by including day care centers on site (Stephens, 1988). Integrated community services, another trend, can enrich the small school program and provide better services to students (Stephens, 1988). Small schools can overcome its weaknesses -- lack of finances and a weak instructional program -- by using a

cluster strategy. This is where neighboring schools or districts share personnel and expenses (Lewis, 1992). Finally, small rural schools can provide cooperative and experimental learning opportunities in the community and participate in integrated learning technologies such as teleconferences and satellite learning (Lewis, 1992).

I would like to conclude with a comment my middle school principal made to the school's 300 students before the school closed down. After recalling the students' academic achievements, their dedication to community service, and contributions to athletics and the arts over the past year he simply said, "This was our golden year. There will never be another one like it."

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